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NASIS

NEBRASKA ANNUAL SOCIAL INDICATORS SURVEY

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NASIS-87, #2

MAJORITY FAVOR HIGHER SALARIES FOR LEGISLATORS

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The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

David R. Johnson and Alan Booth, 1987 Study Co-Directors

The findings in this report are based on data collected in the Twelfth Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). This survey is part of an on-going study of the quality of life in Nebraska conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In the Fall of 1987, a representative sample of 1882 Nebraskans eighteen years of age or older living in households was interviewed by telephone. The respondents were selected using a random digit telephone sampling design. The interview averaged approximately 30 minutes and included questions about work, recreation, attitudes towards public services, taxes, and political and social issues. Other items included in the survey measured the quality of life in the state. For the entire sample, 95 out of 100 times the percentages computed from the items asked on the survey are likely to be accurate to within plus or minus 2.3 percent of the figure that would have been obtained if each adult in Nebraska had been surveyed. This is an estimate of maximum error and for most items the percentages are likely to be even more accurate.

The data gathered by NASIS are used by a wide variety of state and local government agencies for policy and program planning and by faculty and students at the University of Nebraska and other colleges for research and training. No information identifying any respondent is released to any users and the strict confidentiality of individual respondents is rigidly enforced. While the final responsibility for the organisation and structure of the survey and for reports produced rests with the Bureau of Sociological Research, public agencies and university departments play an integral part in planning the survey through an Advisory Committee. Public organisations interested in membership on the Advisory Committee should contact the NASIS Study Directors.

Funding for NASIS comes from the University of Nebraska, the Bureau of Sociological Research, and state and local agencies which buy items and data analysis from the survey.

The NASIS surveys are repeated each year to measure change in the quality of life in Nebraska. While there is a core of questions which is included every year, each survey has a large component of unique items which address specific topical areas. Additional details on the NASIS surveys or questions regarding the use of the survey data or cost of purchasing items on future surveys can be obtained by contacting Alan Booth or David R. Johnson, NASIS Study Directors, at the Bureau of Sociological Research or by sending for a copy of the 1988 NASIS Prospectus.

MAJORITY FAVOR HIGHER SALARIES FOR LEGISLATORS

Salaries for Legislators are a matter of increasing concern. Salaries are set by the constitution and have been at the same level ($4,800) since 1968. The last attempt (in 1982) to increase salaries through a referendum failed. Within the past few months, three senators have resigned, claiming that they could not serve and at the same time make a living. Low pay undoubtedly will be a consideration for others when they decide whether to run again. Some people argue that the low salary keeps capable individuals from running. Individuals with moderate income are particularly hard pressed to hold office and make ends meet. On the other hand, some argue that the fringe benefits of travel and per diem expenses are sufficient to make up for the low salaries.

To change salary levels, public support must be won. What does the public believe is an appropriate salary for legislators. To obtain current views on Legislator salaries, two questions were included on the 1987 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. During the months of October and November, a representative sample of 472 people were asked: "Salaries for state legislators are a topic of increasing concern. Each Legislator works full time for six months of each year. Do you feel the salary for six months of full time work should be $5,000 or less, $7,500, $10,000, $12,500, $15,000 or more than $15,000?"

There is little consensus on the issue. The most popular choices are $5,000, $7,500 and $10,000 as the data in Table 1 show. However, a majority (75%) favor a salary of $7,500 or more and half (50%) support a salary of $10,000 or more. Only 22% supported the current level, and 11% were uncertain on the matter.

TABLE 1

Percent of People Favoring Salary Categories

	Percent in Category	Percent When Uncertain Omitted	Cumulative Percent	Number of People
$5,000 or less	22%	25	100%	105
7,500	22	25	75	104
10,000	21	23	50	97
12,500	8	9	27	38
15,000	10	11	18	48
More than 15,000	6	7	7	26
Uncertain	11	-	-	54
Total	100%	100%		472

We checked to see if people who voted within the last two years view legislator compensation differently from non-voters and investigated whether people from different regions of the state had views at variance with one another. There were no differences on these matters.

A follow up question concerned fringe benefits. "Currently, a legislator's yearly salary is $4,800. Some people believe that the low salary keeps some good people from serving. Others believe the fringe benefits make up for the low salary. Do you believe the salary is too low to attract good people, or do you feel the fringe benefits make up for the low salary. As the data in Table 2 show, by a slim margin, more people believe the current salary is too low to attract good people (47%) than believe that the fringe benefits make up for the low salary (42%). Ten percent of the respondents were uncertain on this matter.

TABLE 2

Percent Who Believe Salary is Too Low Versus Those Who Think Fringe Benefits Make Up For Low Salary

	Percent in Category	Number of People
Salary too low to get good people	47%	224
Fringe benefits make up for salary	42	200
Uncertain	10	48
Total	100%	472

We checked to see whether responses to this question differed by voter status and region of the state. Recent voters were much more likely to think salaries are too low than non-voters. As shown in Table 3, 52% of the voters thought that salaries were too low whereas 37% of the non-voters selected this option. Only 39% of those who voted in the last two years believed fringe benefits made up for the low salary in contrast to 50% of the non-voters who picked this option. There were no significant regional differences in the responses to this question.

Table 3

Beliefs About Legislator Salaries By Voter Status

	Percent in Category For	
	People Who Voted	People Who Did Not Vote
Salary too low to get good people	52%	37%
Fringe benefits make up for salary	39	50
Uncertain	9	13
Total	100%	100%

The data indicate that voters might support a salary raise. It is also clear that in any efforts to increase legislative salaries, the matter of fringe benefits is going to need to be given attention. The amount legislators receive will need to be specified as will the cost of traveling to and from Lincoln and the cost of living in Lincoln. People are going to need to be convinced that fringe benefits do not make up for salary.

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1987 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1	Designs, Procedures, Instruments and Forms for the 1987 NASIS. David R. Johnson. Price: $7.50.